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## PSALM 46: AN INTERPRETATION.

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*Yahweh<sup>1</sup> is our refuge and protection,  
Mighty to help us in our need!  
Therefore we will not tremble, though the earth perish,  
And the mountains tumble into the sea;  
Though the waters roar and surge high,  
Though the mountains are shaken by their proud strength.  
Yahweh Sabaoth is with us,  
Our stronghold is Jacob's God!<sup>2</sup>*

*The stream with its branches makes glad the city of God,  
The holiest of the dwellings of the Most High.  
Yahweh is in the midst of her, she is not in danger,  
Yahweh will help her, when the morning dawns.  
Nations shouted, kingdoms were shaken;  
He gave command, then the earth trembled.  
Yahweh Sabaoth is with us,  
Our stronghold is Jacob's God!*

*Come and see the works of Yahweh,  
He has done wonderful things on the earth!  
He makes wars to cease the world over,  
He breaks the bows, and blunts the spears,  
He burns the shields<sup>3</sup> with fire.  
Cease, and know that I am Yahweh,  
High among the nations, high on earth.  
Yahweh Sabaoth is with us,  
Our stronghold is Jacob's God!*

<sup>1</sup> In this and other places the author of this psalm wrote "Yahweh;" but at a later time this word was replaced by the Jews with the word "God," to avoid the use of the most holy name.

<sup>2</sup> The refrain must be supplied in this place, for the sake of the symmetry of the strophes.

<sup>3</sup> This is the reading of the Septuagint instead of the Hebrew "chariots."

This psalm is a hymn of the last things; its colors are taken from the grand final world-drama, about which the great prophets wrote, and in which Judaism also believed.

With majestic words of faith and unshaken confidence the psalm begins. Terrible troubles—says the old prophecy—shall come over the earth in the last days; there shall be dreadful throes to usher in the new age, an earthquake which shall destroy the very foundations of the earth. The highest things shall be thrown down, the mountains shall tumble into the sea. But in all these catastrophes and convulsions which come upon the universe we are to have no fear. God will be our refuge in the general destruction. Yahweh—thus runs the joyous hymn of the congregation—from times of old our refuge and protection in all troubles, remains faithful to us even then.

One day—this was foretold—another flood will come over the earth (*cf.* the prophetic passages, Isa. 17:12-14; Jer. 47:2; *et al.*). As in the time of chaos before the creation the proud surging waters of the primeval ocean covered the earth (*cf.* Job 38:11) till Yahweh's command drove them into the depth (*cf.* Psa. 104:6 ff.), so, in the same way, at the end of time, the ocean will revolt against Yahweh's creation; roaring and surging the waters will come on; as they advance the mountains will shake because of their proud strength. But the hymn of Zion's congregation will ring out against the raging sea:

Yahweh Sabaoth is with us,  
Our stronghold is Jacob's God!

As in the first deluge the ark of Noah outrode the waters, so will Yahweh's people be saved on Mount Zion. Yahweh Sabaoth is the name of the God of Moses' Ark of the Covenant, as well as of the God of the Temple on Mount Zion. In his name the congregation rebukes the wild waters; against Mount Zion the new chaos will be dashed to pieces.

While the first strophe takes us back to the time when the day of woe is approaching, the second strophe describes the bringing in of the new world and Yahweh's victory. Some say—thus ran the prophecy—Paradise, which was snatched away from men, shall be established again upon the earth. Then the stream of

Paradise, with its four branches (about which the old legend tells us) will again pour forth its living waters. The congregation of Zion had accepted these hopes, and believed that, to the honor and glory of Zion and the true God, Paradise would reappear at Jerusalem. The psalm foretells this in mystical words. With the destructive waters of blasphemy he contrasts the blissful stream of God; then a river with its branches will make glad the city of God; pure joy and delight will reign wherever it flows. Thus the poet alludes to the name of paradise, "Garden of Eden" (bliss). And so Jerusalem is declared to be the true City of God, the holiest of the dwellings of the Most High, the seat of God himself.<sup>4</sup> Therefore let us not fear! God will not give up his holy dwelling to his enemies. God's help appears when the morning dawns. In these words we hear an echo also of the primeval age; in the primitive chaos the water and the darkness existed together (*cf.* Gen. 1:2). And so at the end of time night will return. But when the darkness is deepest, in the last watch of the night, God will come as the morning dawns (*cf.* Isa. 17:14). The new light of the coming day will shine upon the grand work of Yahweh.

And once more the poet strikingly contrasts the day of woe and the works of Yahweh. He introduces a new element of eschatology, which has now become familiar to us; a devastating war will sweep over the Holy Land, the north will pour out its masses of people, but before Zion the uproar shall cease (*cf.* Isa. 17:12-14). Nations and kingdoms shall break forth against God's people. Then Yahweh's thundering voice shall be heard. His mighty words of command shall cause the earth to tremble. Thus is faith proved, and trust shown to be no illusion.

Yahweh Sabaoth is with us,  
Our stronghold is Jacob's God!

While the first strophe expresses the hope of Yahweh's triumphant coming, and the second tells of his advent, the third describes the joyful accomplishment of his victory. Yahweh's work is done! The crisis is past! The waters have disappeared, the nations are

<sup>4</sup> A detailed justification of this interpretation of the river may be seen in GUNKEL, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2d ed., pp. 30 ff.

conquered. Men who lived and shuddered while God performed his astounding deeds, must now look upon Yahweh's works as finished. When he wrought those deeds nobody was permitted to watch him. God's work does not admit a spectator. Now that he has wrought his victory, come from Zion and look at the field strewn with dead bodies, which he has caused. Now all weapons are gone; the bones are broken, the points of the spears are blunted, the shields are burned. Never again upon the earth shall arms be lifted. Thus, with one mighty blow, Yahweh creates everlasting peace.

This hope for peace at the close of the present world-era belongs also to the prophetic thought of the future (*cf.* Isa. 2:2 ff.; 11:6 ff.). This hope, too, is of mythic origin: at one time, in the "golden age," God's peace is said to have been among men and animals. Now begins Yahweh's glorious reign. From all that possibly might be said about it, the psalmist seizes upon these words with which Yahweh proclaims his ascension to the throne: "Cease your hostility," he commands all the nations, referring to their warfare against Zion; "Know who I am! I am called Yahweh." In this name of Yahweh the poet in his enthusiasm sums up the triumphant power of God. Says Yahweh, "I am the highest Lord of all nations, king and God of the universe."

And now for a third time sounds the refrain of the congregation, inspired by this sublime picture,

Yahweh is with us,  
He is the God who helps and shields us!

This psalm is usually interpreted as referring to some specific historical event at some stage of Israel's past history. But such an interpretation is too limited and shallow. The words receive their full meaning only when made to refer to the great messianic consummation of the present world-era. It contains a wonderful expression of the trust of the chosen people, and shows what immense enthusiasm lay in their messianic hope. To Germans this psalm is especially dear, because it suggested to Luther that splendid hymn: "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott."